

No Exit



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The smoke spiraled up from his cigarette, engulfed his head and stung his nose: an acrid, chemical smell. He came back to consciousness and jerked his eyes up from his notebook to the ashtray. The coal was burning the filter. He stabbed it out with a muttered, "Shit."

He squeezed his eyes tightly shut, then opened them Now. He resumed reading, sitting rigid in his armchair, concentrating fiercely on the page of

yellow paper in the notebook.

He might have been moving his eyes left to right, left to right, over blank paper. After finishing the first sentence he looked up and tried to visualize what he had read. Impossible. His recalcitrant memory would show him only one thing:

The spiral.

He slammed the book shut and started to throw it at a wall. Instead he got up, set the book aside and began pacing the room. His feet shook the floor as they fell. Down to the window by his littered desk, a pause to stare out at the barbershop across the street, back past the couch and reading lamp to the table

with - the record player. Halfway through a turn he gave it up and went into the kitchen to make lunch.

* * *

Hours ago he'd seen the advertisement on the inside front cover of Popular Mechanics. He'd bought the magazine yesterday and started reading it this morning at breakfast. He hadn't gotten far.

LEARN HYPNOTISM!

Below the big block letters was a small, closely ruled spiral, a picture of part of the equipment advertised in the mail-order hypnotism course. The original, he

read, was the size of a phonograph record, and was meant to be played like one, without the needle.

His eyes were drawn to the center, down into a whirlpool of black, and white. And then it started to spin... He gazed at it for minutes, watching the darting illusory line that seemed to shimmer around the center like the gleam of sunlight on a revving propeller.

He jerked his eyes away, annoyed at himself. He was wasting time. He turned some pages and started reading.

He couldn't remember, now, what the article was about. He had kept turning back to the inside front cover, where a

whirlpool spun in beating tides of grey: motion in a printed page, defying his eyes to find beginning or end. Finally he had thrown the magazine aside and started preparing the next lesson in his Famous Photographer's course.

He couldn't remember what he'd done since.

It wasn't really lunchtime, but he felt restless and needed something to do. So he went to the refrigerator, took out a hard-boiled egg, some lettuce, mayonnaise, half a lemon, two slices of bread and a tomato, and brought them over to the sideboard. He started grating the egg and mixing in mayonnaise and pepper. Then he remembered what he'd

forgotten. The sardines.

In a sardine sandwich.

The spiral took form in the shadows of the kitchen: an illusion of light and dark that slowly began to spin. He shook his head and concentrated on the lettuce. Chop! Chop! The spiral faded, vanished. He relaxed. Pain stung his left thumb and he looked down to see blood welling from the cut.

He put the knife down and stood back, rage boiling within him. And there in the air before the ceiling, darkness began to run together and spin...

* * *

After lunch he lay on his back, his arms under his head, the curving textured pattern of the bedspread pressing into the skin of his bare back. He wouldn't be able to sleep tonight if he slept now. He never could. But he was tired, and there was no use trying to work any more.

He couldn't sleep either.

Eyes open, he saw a faint spiral gather and turn on the white ceiling. Eyes closed, he watched the pattern, dark-on-dark, a pipeline into nothing, reaching down, out, around, dropping as night and evening around his bed. Now he no longer saw the spiral; he sensed it as a familiar concept, a feeling of rotation in his belly and his gonads and his inner

ear. It was like an insistent tune, not forgotten even when not remembered, playing silently in the back of his mind. The notes sank, carrying him down; they spun out, around, taking form, gathering in glowing galaxies of stars against the night behind his eyelids.

Was this the feel of insanity?

Growling, he got off the bed. He would face the problem now, by God, and lick it.

Not by answering the ad. Be damned if he gave money to the company which had started this in the first place. Anyway it would take weeks to get an answer. But...

Groggy and irritable, he went into the living room, afraid that if he moved too fast the entire room might start to whirl.

He found what he wanted among the magazines and books and half-finished lessons on the sofa. Scissors, he thought. They should be in the bathroom. They weren't. He found them in the kitchen. God alone knew how they had gotten there. Carefully he cut out the picture of the little black-and-white spiral, three and a half inches across. One last snip cut a hole in the center, or as near as he could manage.

Now! He carried the paper to his record player, set it on the turntable and brought a chair over so he could look straight

down at it.

This scrap of paper had ruined half his day. Now let it do its worst.

He turned on the record player.

The spoke in the center partially spoiled the illusion, but what was left was powerful. His eyes were held fast, unable even to blink. He wrapped his fingers tightly around the edges of the chair, and continued to look down on - or was it into - the rotating spiral.

He could have licked the real thing, in fact, if he were determined not to be hypnotized. He'd heard too often that nobody could be hypnotized against his

will.

And yet ... it was strange, how he seemed to be drifting through an endless cylindrical space. Now the center of the spiral was whole and complete. He seemed to be looking down into eternity. Really, he ought to be surprised, but he could feel nothing but a vast calm. For a time the calm washed over his mind, and his thoughts became "noise": random and meaningless patterns.

He spun, helpless...

...Memory returned slowly and painfully, bit by piece by isolated incident, and surprise became superfluous. It was natural that the spiral

had grown at the edges until it was now the entire universe. When, except during the self-induced dreams, had the Tunnel been anything else to him?

Before the Revolt, his memory whispered sadly.

Lucifer wriggled his body to move his eye. It jerked in the socket with a grating pain. He had held it fixed on the end of the Tunnel for so long that he'd forgotten how to use the muscles, and the eyelid was dry as silk. Now he could see the tubular wall of the escape proof prison (black and white crystal in four broad endless spiral bands) moving past as he fell. He fell slowly, tugged by the merest trace of gravity, as he had fallen since

his surrender at the Revolt's abortive end.

He hadn't believed it at first. But the Tunnel was escape proof. Some unseen force kept him back from the wall, and the end to which he was failing did not exist. Though it ran straight as a line, the Tunnel was closed, perhaps in four- or five-space. By using all the magnifying power of his remarkable eye Lucifer could just see himself falling far ahead down the well to infinity.

Yet there was an escape. Behind and ahead the spiral walls seemed to close into a flat, two-dimensional image; and as the Tunnel's gentle gravity pulled him

along, the spiral turned hypnotically.

He found it easy to induce self-hypnotism.

His last dream hadn't been too bad. It had, in fact, been not only satisfying but well balanced; had contained not only success, but occasional failure; had held not only immediate pleasure, but the greater pleasures of the future: Success, marriage, respect.

What had killed the illusion was the ever-present intrusion of reality into the background. Applying his own name to the mythical arch-villain of the universe, making it nearly impossible to identify with his real self, had been deliberately

clever. But other items had crept in.

Like the Yin-Yang symbol and the shape of the galaxies, nagging reminders of the Tunnel. Like the barberpole, meeting him on every street, a Tunnel turned inside out. Like the saddened face on the Moon, the round helpless face of that fool Yahweh, who at the last had shown himself neither foolish nor helpless.

The worst flaw in his recent dream had been a slight over-complexity. His plans for the revolution had been similarly flawed. This time the dream would be simpler.

His eye caught the flow of lines down the Tunnel, watched them spread,

flattening to a disc that spun out around him, out and over. The lines whirled, white, black, merging to grey, separating. Ghostly radial lines appeared and vanished. The white crystal fragmented into dancing stars. He plunged amid the whirling galaxies of imagination...

And opened his eyes, then blinked against the lamplight shining off the yellow paper of his notebook. He had been paying all too little attention to his correspondence course lately. It wasn't like him to let his mind wander so.

Impatiently he got up and began to pace the room, scratching the bald scalp all people had. Up to the window to watch

the evening settle over the pet store opposite his house, back down to the couch, back to the window. He stopped to catch the evening breeze. Night sifted down. Out in space a few lonely sparks pierced the infinite dark: the planets. He wondered if there was life on any of them, or if Man was alone in an empty universe. As the streetlights came on all at once, he turned away, stuck a cigarette in his mouth and set the end on fire.

The smoke spiraled up from his cigarette...